Ringing's future - sacred or secular

reviewing the legacy of Belfry Reform

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"The city's common people are excited while hearing Peter bellow!"
("PLEBS PATRIAE PLAUDIT DUM PETRUM PLENIUS AUDIT")
Peter bell, Exeter Cathedral, 1484

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1. Introduction.

I'm Richard Johnston, a member of the Exeter Cathedral Society. I ring methods, and Devon call changes, after moving to Devon in 2010. This is relevant as Belfry Reform did not work well in Devon, even though it started there. Devon provides insights for the future.

My professional scientific research background informs my research in English cultural and social history, but I'm not a ringing specialist, so I'm interested in the big picture rather than details.

I'll summarise the history of ringing, the impact of Belfry Reform, its legacies and implications for the future. There is much to cover. But first…

2. Can history inform future decisions about ringing?

Only if we ask:

- **why** things happened,
- not just **what** happened, and
- **analyse** the **results.**

We must see history:

- from the **public's** perspective,
- **not just ringers'** perspective.

And **understand** the **social and cultural forces** that people responded to or took advantage of.

3 Activities must be relevant and adapt

To get recruits and thrive, any activity must:

- be socially relevant and meet current cultural needs;
- cultivate a strong positive public profile with elite support.

As cultural conditions change,

- it must adapt,
- to suit each new generation,
  - **or weaken and die.**

Evolution only works short term.

To last for centuries needs **cultural revolutions that reinvent and rebrand**.

As we review ringing's past, ask *"Is this in some way relevant now"*?

4. Historical summary (over-simplified!).
4.1 Medieval period.

Bells chimed as signals for religious, civic, and personal reasons all day. Cities were noisy!

Swing chiming developed in towns for popular celebration of civic and religious festivals. The latter were times for secular celebration, like South American carnivals, open air celebrations with bonfires, drinking, and dancing.

Bells were rung high, as loudly as possible: ***"People are excited while hearing bells bellow!"*** Bells were by far the loudest musical sound before modern amplification.

Noisy celebration with bells was for the community to have fun!

It's primordial and universal, like an open air rock concert.

Why so many towers with bells?

Churches were all-purpose, community buildings, maintained by parishioners.

Community focused,

- 15th century religious piety, and
- secular inter-parish rivalries,

made parishes construct

- costly towers with
- bigger, louder bells.

By the Reformation, celebrations included **high swing chiming in rounds**.

4.2 Reformation aftermath secularised celebration ringing *(1540 to mid C18)*.

4.2.1. Bells were

- religiously redundant,
- except chiming one bell before service, and
- briefly threatened.

Ringing and bells were saved by Queen Elizabeth adopting popular celebration to promote English nationalism and community cohesion. Hearers paid for such ringing until the late 18th century.

4.2.2. A new type of ringer

In the late 16th century, in cities,

- **young Gentlemen took up ringing as exercise,** and
- they would pay to ring;
- they rang for hours at a time.

Their high social status, and public love of bells, inhibited complaints.

4.2.3. New ringers do new ringing

They instigated

- recastings and augmentations, and
- improvements to fittings.

These let bells ring over balance, giving control at both strokes, **allowing call changes, and then method ringing in the 17th century.**

These developments **renewed inter-parish bell rivalry**, with big bells recast into lighter augmented rings.

4.2.4. Ringing societies and competitions

In the 17th and 18th centuries, **city wide ringing societies formed in major ringing centres**,

- to run elite ringing,
- encouraging performance ringers to form strong bands, and
- made extensive connections between elite ringers across the country.

Ringing competitions

- raised standards, and
- were public entertainment,
- with gambling and drinking, both widely accepted until the 19th century.

4.3. Ringing lost elite support *(Mid C18 to 1840).*

Outdoor popular celebration, with bonfires and bells, lost elite support and became a "nuisance". Ringing ceased to be a Gentleman's sport, and so noise complaints began. But ringing and competitions continued among working men.

Method ringing developed further, but most ringing was rounds and call changes.

Ringing usually had nothing to do with religious services, but often took place on Sundays, the working man's day off.

4.4. Religious revival made churches solely religious buildings *(1840 to 1870)*

The clergy led, Oxford Movement revival emphasised moral improvement of the working classes. Incumbants had to be resident from 1838, raising the social status and power of parish clergy. Clergy took control of church buildings and removed traditional secular activities. Parishioners' west gallery choirs were dismissed, and replaced by organs and robed choirs.

Ringing was under threat:

- Ringers were viewed as drunken and dissolute;
- Ellacombe invented a chiming system to replace ringers;
- Some bands were excluded from towers.

But antiquarian interest in bells led to ringing Clergy, who created method bands in their towers.

4.5. Belfry Reform *(1870 to 1914).*

From the 1850s, some Oxford university clergy learned to ring. They formed the OUS in 1872, and the Devonshire Ringers Guild in 1874, **to promote Belfry Reform.** Other Diocesan Guilds and the Central Council soon followed.

4.5.1. Belfry Reform objectives:

1)   Promote method ringing **to clergy** as a morally improving religious activity, as "better than rounds and call changes", to recruit intellectually and morally better ringers;

2)   Persuade clergy to appoint regular church members as ringers - who were often paid - forming clergy led bands to ring before services;

3)   Inculcate **ringers** to see ringing as a religious duty – hence the medieval term, "Guild";

4)   Control what is legitimate to ring on bells, banning non-religious ringing and competitions;

5)   Create method ringing bands in every tower.

4.5.2 Belfry Reform Guild activities:

1) Gentry clergy ran Guilds autocratically over working class ringers.

2) Guild meetings had:

- demonstration method ringing,
- a service (with sermon),
- and a tea.

Clergy took their bands of ringers there.

3) Paid itinerent teachers sometimes taught method ringing.

4) Promoted peal ringing – the ringing clergy's recreation.

4.5.3 Clergy power, and the deference and duty culture, made Belfry Reform hard to resist.

Reformers largely secured their objectives, and **rewrote ringing's history**.

They met resistance:

- from Devon call change bands, who despised method ringers' bad striking.
- Good ringers still found ways to ring at towers with high standards.

The older Ringers' Societies continued, but **submitted to the Central Council.**

4.5.4 Belfry Reform outcomes

1) **Made ringing a religious rather than a communal or sport activity**,a morally worthy contribution to religious worship, so gaining clergy support.

2) Existing ringers came under clergy control, with disorderly ones dismissed.

3) Recruits became youths from church choirs rather than from the community.

4) **Put ringers into a subservient relationship with the Church**, in contrast with organists.

5) **Eliminated competitions, ending public fun and celebration** – private peal ringing was no substitute.

6) Ending community involvement, and clergy control over ringers, **distanced ringers from the public.**

7) **Made the "local tower" the sole functional unit,** in place of the town, for recruitment, training, and most ringing activity.

8) Created a culture that **assumed recruits would commit** to ringing bells at the local tower **for life, as a religious duty**, and **obliged ringers to ring at their nearest tower**, whatever its standard.

9) **Entrenched the difficult and unsafe teaching of bell handling** at top rather than by ringing up and down.

10) **Without paid trainers, tower based training was mainly poor**, but youths tolerated lengthy training in a disciplined age, when few pastimes provided income.

11) **Ringing simple methods became widespread, but ruined striking.**

12) As Guilds were **designed to impose tower based Belfry Reform**, they were **too big to meet ringers' needs**. Unlike the old city societies, they are ill-fitted for:

- promoting ringer recruitment, training and performance;
- promoting or representing ringers' opinions.

4.6 History after 1914.

The 20th century saw many augmentations, and technical advances in method ringing. But grass roots ringing stagnated or declined, following church attendances, and the end of "cultural Christianity". In the Interwar period, ringing was **seen as out-dated, a religious, "Merrie England" hangover,** and saw fewer recruits.

4.6.1. Post-war revival.

The wartime ringing ban renewed interest, and recruitment surged.

From the 1950s to 70s, **University Societies, which were ringer and performance focused, boosted high end peal ringing and established a new lay leadership**, but within existing structures.

4.6.2 Recruitment troubles.

Youth recruitment became largely confined to ringing families after 1970,

- because of other attractions, and
- ringing's unappealing image,
  - compounded by the need to commit long term, and
  - dire, slow training.

The response was to recruit older people, with short term, mainly social motives:

- often having weak, poorly controlled muscles,
- they are hard to train,
- do not usually get far with methods, and provide no future leaders or conductors.

This enhanced the old fogey image making ringing still less attractive to young people.

4.7. Summing up:

This review shows that **changes in the use of bells happened because new people had new goals**. Earlier uses usually continued, but were less important.

In the 15th century, **civic and popular desire to party and outdo neighbouring parishes** created celebration ringing, and new towers and bells.

From late 16th century, **young Gentlemen became sporting ringers to exercise**, compete and gamble.Subsequently, they instigated bell augmentations and altered hanging to allow ringing over balance, refreshing inter-parish bell rivalry; developed method ringing, and founded city ringing societies.

Between 1870 and 1914, **Belfry Reform Clergy ringers changed bell ringing into a religious activity for subservient churchmen ringers**, and forced a "local tower", method ringing focus.

From the 1950s, after a period of ringing decline, **university societies with a ringer development focus revitalised ringing as musical performance and sport, leading to major technical advances**. But Belfry Reform culture prevented secularisation and ringer focused training.

Belfry Reform, through its institutions, remains the main determinant of current ringing culture as quasi-religious, and lacking its pre-Reform independence, when churches were community assets.

5. Unhelpful Reform legacies:

5.1 Unhealthy subservience to the Church.

Reform Clergy dominance and heavy paternalism

- left ringers seeing themselves as dependent on the Church,
- with servile attitudes to service ringing,
- that contribute to the "everything free" ringing culture.

Ringers' position contrasts sharply with organists,

- whose relationship is commercial;
- with robust rules governing relations with church authorities,
- who respond quickly and expensively to organ faults.

By contrast, ringers contributing to bell refurbishment has become normalised; it is subservient, as ringers can't control what they pay for: the Church can sell it without recompense.

Subserviency is so entrenched that ringers can't imagine having the same autonomy as organists, or being operationally self-sufficient in a commercial relationship with the church for using bells.

5.2 Religious focus:

- The lack of ringers under 50 is widely recognised, but remedies fail, because **ringing's religious brand image repels most young people**.
- Ringing Guilds perpetuate religious objectives that discourage recruits and advanced method ringing.
- Religious focus cut off ringing from its community and artistic sporting roots.
- Ambivalence about bells' "religious message" makes many ringers introspective: they concentrate on ringing's benefits to themselves.
- So ringers avoid direct contact with the public, and what ringing means to the public.

5.3. Method focus:

There is:

- Widespread lack of attention to striking and what the public hears.
- Uninformed prejudice against rounds and call change ringing.
- Prejudice against ringing competitions.
- An unrealistic desire to form method bands in every tower.

5.4. Local tower focus:

- Tower basis for all ringer development impedes and restricts progress;
- adhoc training methods, and incompetent trainers, make learning difficult and protracted; and
- there is no system to match ringers and learners to the most suitable tower for them.

6. Responding to the Legacies:

6.1. Religious focus response: ringing must face change and secularise.

Belfry Reform wedded ringing dependently to religion. The number of services to ring for is falling, so bells are heard less often. Churches are closing and towers lost, but ringers seem powerless: longer term, the Church may even implode. **Like it or not, ringing will change.**

Yet, many fail to **understand why** (and how) ringing **must secularise and become independent to survive in a secularised society,** increasingly hostile to Christianity, which is seen as "weird".

6.1.1. Religious barriers.

1) The public's religious image of ringing is understandable, as routine ringing is for services.
2) It's the dominant ringers' perspective, because *service ringing is what they signed up to.* (The many who might ring if it were not religious aren't ringers.)
3) Central Council's and Guilds' constitutions' religious objectives and close relationships with Church authorities inhibit secularisation.
4) Some ringing leaders cling to a "religious, heritage, old fashioned custom, by old men" brand image. Unattractive to young recruits since 1970, they still expect this "offer" to attract. This image is so embarrassing that some young ringers won't admit to friends they ring!

6.1.2. Ringing brands for the young.

The **younger public likes noise, and would** value the sound of bells and **ring, if ringing presented itself as it was, and really is: intellectually challenging, sporty, healthy exercise, musical, sociable and noisy fun!**

6.1.3. Community ringing.

Survival depends on ringing reverting to be relevant to and supported by the community.

The Church recognises the need

- to promote community uses of churches,
- to encourage public support for maintenance, and so prevent closures.

Ringers already benefit churches, providing income, as at Huntsham.

6.1.4. Community "Friends of the bells".

Ringers should engage with locals, forming "Friends of the bells".

Find people who like bells rung,   **let them** change the public image, pay for personal or community ringing, find and inspire recruits (their children or grandchildren), and defend ringing against objectors.

6.1.5. Make ringing public, noisy, celebration fun!

  Let the Friends link bells to local community events, organising ringing festivals with competition ringing and a party, involving the local pub and businesses.

6.2. Method focus response:

6.2.1. The sound the community hears.

In 1677 Campanalogia complained about people ringing changes instead of striking rounds properly!

Belfry Reformers promoted method ringing for self-interest and ringers' morals, not for good ringing.

6.2.1. Cartwheel rounds.

It is easy to learn rounds cartwheeled below balance, and to ring to rhythm. It's an even pull every time, with the bell at the right height, controlled by the tail length. Anyone can learn fast and enjoy the body rhythm. Bell handling doesn't matter: that's good for older learners. Ringing up and down Devon style is the same technique, and the best way to learn.

6.2.2. Devon call changes.

Making a call change means pulling harder or checking and the opposite for the next blow. A new band can ring remarkably well. Recruits are full ringers within months.

The public likes what they hear: it changes slowly, is understandable, and sounds good.

Realistic for rural towers, learners can swing chime right from the start.

6.2.3. Competitions.

Competitions are not only ringer and community fun and an opportunity to party, but provide essential motivation, encouraging listening, and good striking.

6.2.4 Is method ringing too hard?

- Bell control over balance is hard, making handling technique critical.
- The open handstroke implies an unbalanced pull, and the interval is always changing.
- Ropesight and learning methods are difficult. It's hard to strike accurately, and method errors afflict pain on neighbours.
- Compared with call changes, the public finds hearing method ringing hard to "get into".

6.2.5. Learning method takes time, effort and serious commitment.

Older recruits often don't have the aptitude or desire. Wastage is high, which wastes the band's time.

Recruits now have a wide variety of motives:

- Few expect a long term duty commitment;
- Most initially only want to see if ringing is for them;
- Some enough to say they can ring, and move on.

Some give up just as they become useful, finding

- method ringing too hard
- or too big a commitment.

They might have stayed, with less demanding call changes.

6.2.6. Tower bell recruits should start with a call change band.

Those with potential as method ringers should learn it as a separate intensive process, with successful ones moving on to a method band.

A method ringing tower is hard to start from scratch, and vulnerable to collapse from people leaving.

Self-sufficient method ringing bands in every tower is not a sustainable objective.

6.3. Local tower focus response:

6.3.1. The self-sufficient "Local tower".

Local tower focus works for rounds and call changes, as the training time is short. After that, learners ring the same thing as the most experienced ringer. **All call change ringers are equal, and happy.**

But method ringers have a wide range of competence.   The local tower focus for all recruitment and training explains why it is hard to get into Surprise, and why advanced method ringing bands, dependent on these towers, have a recruitment crisis. **It's inefficient, and makes ringers unhappy.**

6.3.2. Self-sufficient method towers rarely progress far:

- The higher the top team standard,
- the more practice time is spent on the staircase of learners at different stages,
- slowing or reversing the advance of the top team,
- making top team members dissatisfied, and inclined to move on,
- while learners spend longer in the demoralising position of "catch up",
- with much sitting out, making them more likely to give up,
- discouraged by contrasting their ability with the top team.

This limits how far the band can get: with recruits now older, few bands get past plain bob.

6.3.3. The "Local tower" ethos.

- This discourages inter-band ringer transfers, so Guilds have no systems to facilitate and encourage them.
- It puts ringers in towers, but damages recruitment, retention and ringer development.

- People feel obliged to ring locally, but may not make their best contribution to ringing as a whole. One may be too good, making others uncomfortable, or drag a band back, yet be an asset elsewhere.

6.3.4. Finding the right band.

People should ring with bands that suit their level and with their motivations: some people and towers want to ring their best, others want no pressure and some fun.

People are happiest ringing with people at much the same level, and learn most comfortably with people slightly better, as they are not intimidating.

6.3.5. The ethical barrier.

Guilds are unlikely to support the required change in ringing culture, because the local tower ethos is deeply embedded in ringer ethics, even though a hierarchy of towers with different method ringing levels, already exists, though more commonly at "magnet" practices than on Sundays.

6.3.6. Developing method bands.

Pre-Reform, tower self-sufficiency was not expected in method ringing. Advanced bands got recruits from lesser bands, recruited successively back to the grass roots, just like any other team performing music or sport, where quality matters. **The old city ringing societies operated this system of band and ringer development.**

Today, advanced band and ringer development lies mainly outside the Guild framework, as Guilds' organisational structures were not designed to encourage it.

The current situation. Most ringer development is informally organised by peal and quarter peal organisers and conductors, handbell ringers, and training enthusiasts, who ignore Guild and tower affiliations as irrelevant.

Handbell and peal ringing is organised on a "who you know" basis, often making it hard for outsiders to get into. Such bands normally have regular members, with outsiders offered places only when a regular cannot ring.

6.3.7. Advanced ringing recruitment.

Bands seek out, and mentor, promising young people, from grass roots towers. But grass roots now rarely recruits the young ringers advanced ringing needs as **leaders, teachers and conductors.** Older recruits just don't get good enough for that.

Advanced ringing needs a direct young people recruitment path. The present informality makes effective action unlikely until peal ringers can't find others to ring with. **That's too late.**

6.3.8. Training: handling to rounds.

The "local tower focus" made all training local, amateurish, and often dire. Brief periods slotted into a practice wastes everyone's time.It's slow and puts learners off. You learn to play an instrument well, with a teacher, before playing with an orchestra. **The learner should learn on his own, all that can be learned alone.**

Learners deserve good teaching. Good handling teachers are rare. Teachers could make a living, providing the intensive coaching non-ringers expect to pay for.

Good learning: A call change ringer:

- "Father taught me handling
- by starting with a coil, and ringing up and down.

- When he was happy with that,
- he rang the treble, and I the second,
- and I followed him up and down.
- We did this, until it was right.
- Then he took me to practice with the band.
- At the end of the practice, he said, 'You're in the competition, Saturday'.
- We came third.
- Third time out we won."

6.3.9 Training: handling

Teaching top ringing first is dangerous,provoking anxiety, especially in older learners, resulting in lack of confidence, rope fear, poor handling styles, failure to listen, and poor striking.

Learning this way, doesn't let learners become confidently in control, feel the bell as a pendulum, or develop rhythm.

Top ringing over balance, should be a natural extension of rhythmic ringing learned below balance.

6.3.10 Training: methods.

"Local tower" method teaching gives too little time on the rope.

- Many teachers don't realise that pupils mislearn.
- Pushing learners too fast wastes time, and demoralises.
- Long times sitting out, with slow progress, makes learners quit.

Learning how to ring methods should be separated from bell control. In the past, single handbells were used to make learning easier. Modern simulators are better, and can be improved.

6.3.11. Method learning with simulators.

Simulators can provide intensive learning, in private, so ringers become confident, and able to perform well. They can learn at their own pace, at their preferred times, ringing by blue line or structure, gaining ropesight, and good striking, under distance learning, supervised by good teachers. **Once ready, they can ring with others, and get it right, without practices.** Performances, with placed bands, are more productive than practices.

6.3.12. Better simulators.

Current simulator programs assume knowledge of ringing, and how to progress.

A multi-level, interactive "video game" could teach a raw recruit method ringing, while assessing aptitude, for tower bells, paired handbells, and conducting. Progress in the game depends on achieving competence. Structured learning, teaching one thing at a time, consolidated by repetition, with distractions, promotes stress free learning, and assessment, good learning. **Everything is repeated until never done wrong.** Early stages include rhythm and striking precision. These need not look ringing related, making the game attractive to gamers.

6.4. Summary: Future frustrations.

Although ringers are well intentioned, change is constrained by ringing culture, Guild structures, and local tower independence. Total reliance on voluntary labour makes everything slow.

Problems existing institutions cannot address adequately, if at all, are:

- ringing's subservient dependency on the Church,
- poor public engagement,
- brand image,
- recruitment of young people, and
- advanced method ringing training.

An independent, fully secular, commercial organisation, could deal with them all.

6.5. Future regained? An Organisation: for secularised performance ringing

a) Ringing needs rebranding, as secular, to attract young people, and make ringing something the public actively supports and enjoys.

b) Advanced method ringing, because it is sparsely located, needs a formal, fully secular, national organisation, to seek out, train, and assess the competence of, young recruits, wherever they may be, and find or create, suitable bands for them.

c) Target recruits. Rather than train recruits that turn up casually, make an attractive "offer", to the type of young person sought, placed where they will find it.

One source is video gamers. They are obsessive, clever, and love patterns. Create a video game, as already mentioned. Provide a path to ringing with others like them, with handbells, tower bell simulators, and mini-rings. Once hooked, they won't care if big bells are in churches.

d) It must be a commercial venture, employing professional trainers, providing intensive, recruit-led, training, doing as much as possible by distance learning.

What comes free is suspect: recruits will pay for training, in line with current expectations.

Other income comes from equipment sales: video games, cheap handbells, and heavy bell simulators, which can be developed, or improved.

e) A new church relationship. Because the organisation is ringer and band focused, and secular, access to tower bells must be commercial, much as peal bands' relationships are. Churches need income to survive: competition will keep the price down.

Longer term, the organisation may buy redundant towers.

f) Public enjoyment of ringing, raises the profile. Public entertainment is what ringing's for! Ringers can earn money by ringing at public celebrations. Providing entertainment, like the 12 bell final but for the public, gives commercial opportunities.

All this will happen when someone believes such an organisation is profitable.
Ringing back to its roots, before the moralistic clergy got it.

7. Conclusions.

- New people transformed the purpose of ringing bells over the centuries, leaving older ways as vestiges.
- Belfry reform, the last major transformation, made ringers subservient to the Church, and ringing about service ringing.
- Religious ringing is declining, and many ringers ring for non-religious reasons
- Ringing has a damaging religious brand image in a secular world, which alienates the public, and the young people needed as recruits.
- For ringing to survive, long term, **it needs rebranding**, making ringing **secular, and fully**

engaged with the public, as happy consumers.

Community ringing:

- Grass roots ringing can continue as it is, short term, as long as the C of E needs service ringing, relying on older people, ringing call changes. But bell nostalgia may die with those born before 1970.

- Local tower ringing should expand to support **fun, and community celebrations,** and so change its local image, and create local "Friends of the bells" organisations.

Method ringing:

- Method ringing is declining, and may become limited to urban areas.

- It's difficult for old learners, who would do better ringing call changes.

- To be attractive, method ringing must be a fully secular activity, that is publicly recognised, and supported,

    - as public entertainment, and

    - as an artistic sport comparable with gymnastics.

A national Organisation for performance ringing.

- **Advanced method ringing survival needs** a ringer focused, secular, commercially run, professional body to attract, retain, train, develop and assess young ringers, and allocate them to performance bands.

- The organisation should aim to become the governing body for performance ringing.

Ringing must change, or perish.